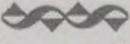
A detailed illustration of John Henry, a Black man, wearing a blue cap, a red bandana, and a dark vest over a light shirt. He is sitting on a stone wall, holding a hammer. The background shows a rocky landscape with greenery.

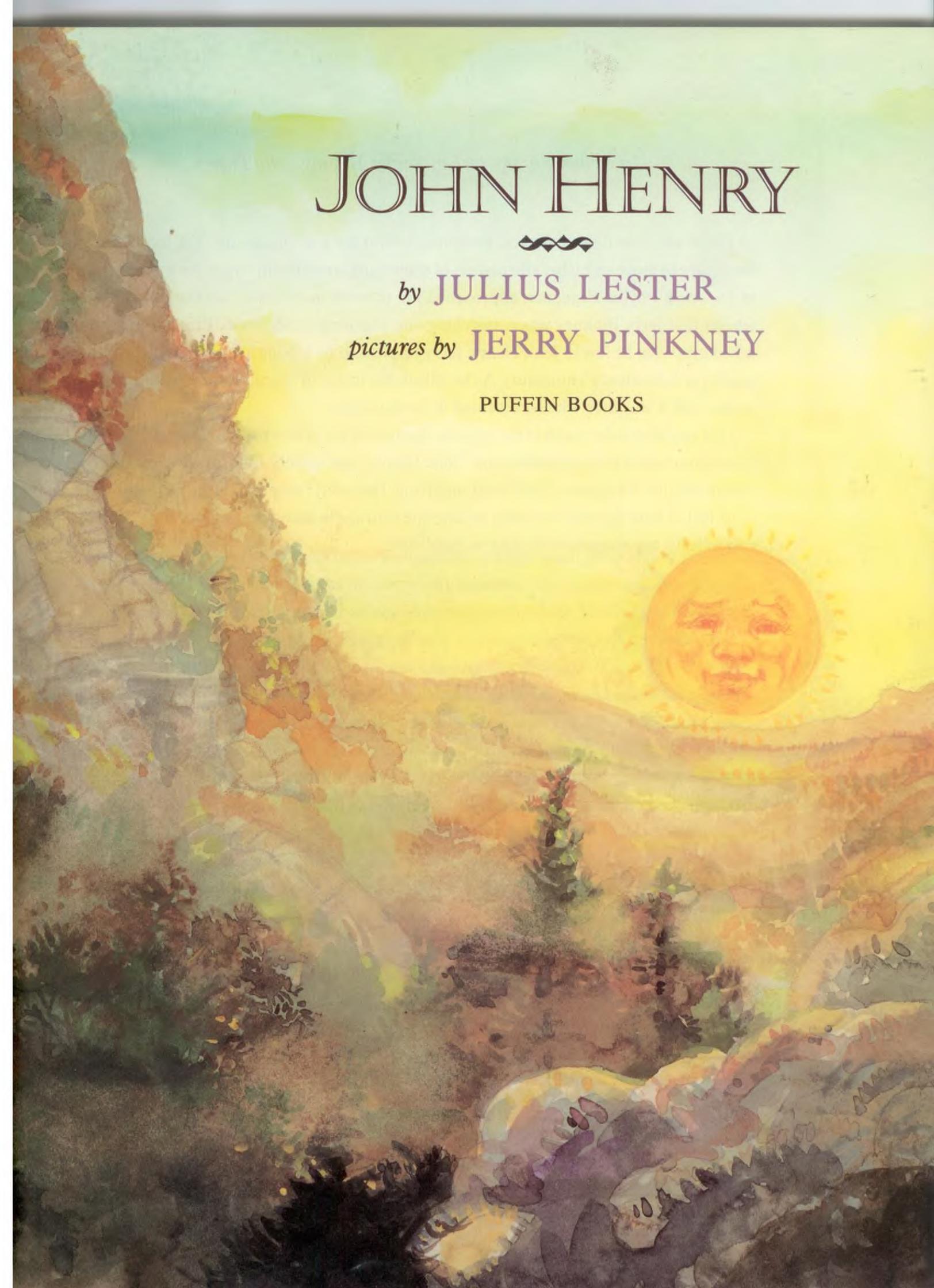
JOHN HENRY

by
JULIUS LESTER


pictures by
JERRY PINKNEY





A watercolor illustration of a landscape. In the foreground, there are dark, textured rocks and some green and brown foliage. The middle ground shows rolling hills and a valley. In the background, a large, bright yellow sun with a human-like face (eyes, nose, and a smiling mouth) is shining. The sky is a mix of yellow and light green. The overall style is soft and painterly.

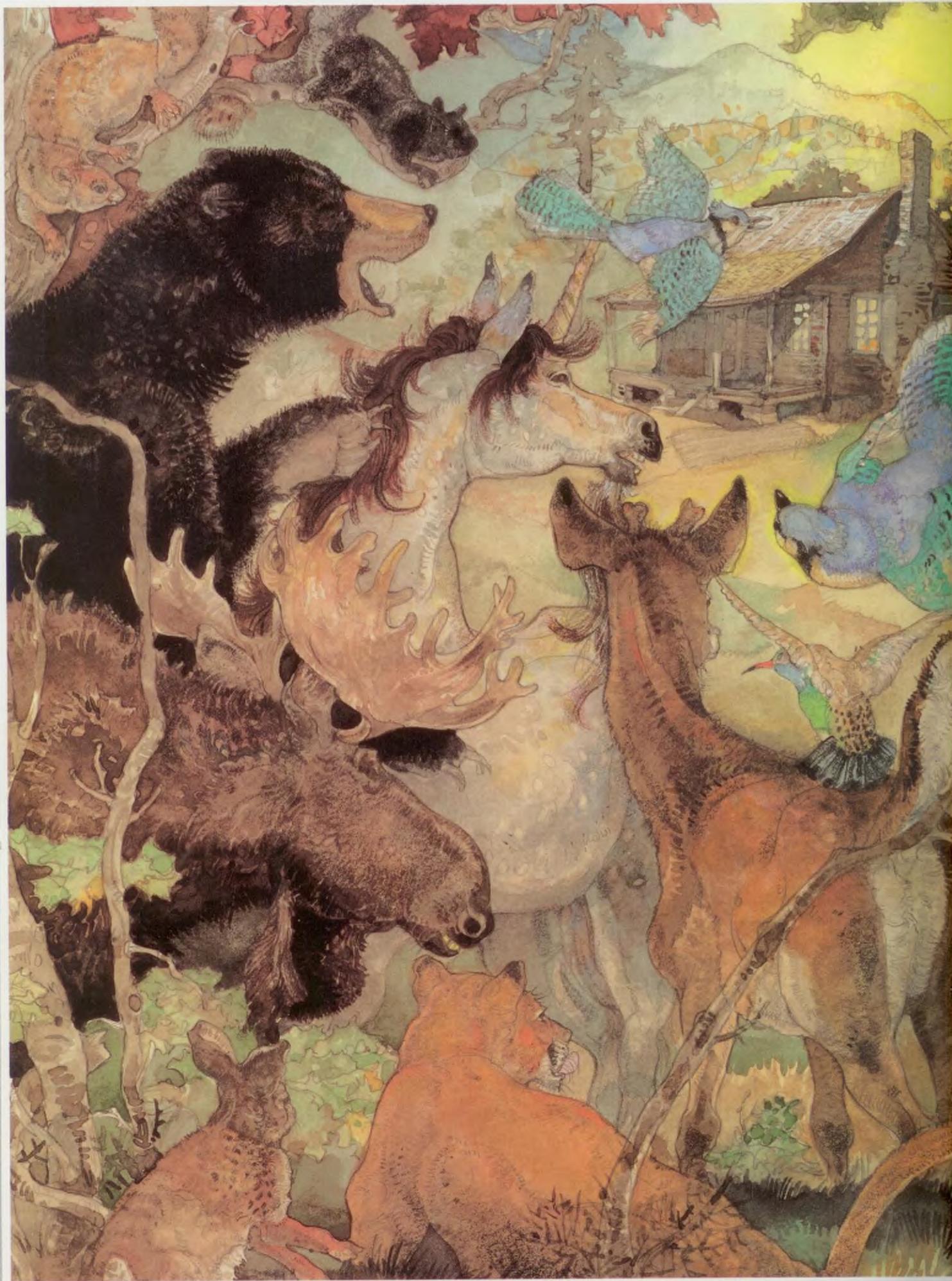
JOHN HENRY



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PUFFIN BOOKS





You have probably never heard of John Henry. Or maybe you heard about him but don't know the ins and outs of his comings and goings. Well, that's why I'm going to tell you about him.

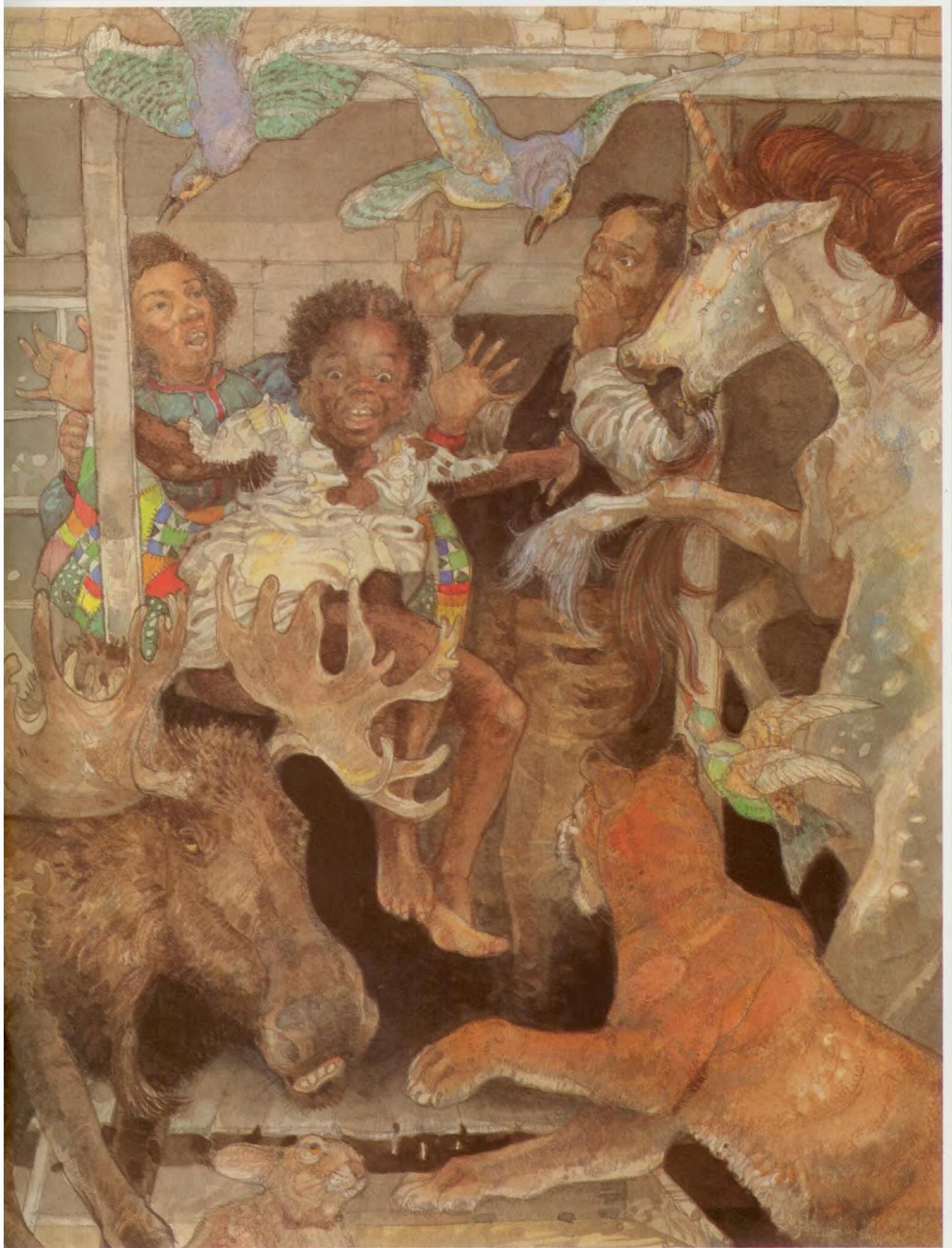
When John Henry was born, birds came from everywhere to see him. The bears and panthers and moose and deer and rabbits and squirrels and even a unicorn came out of the woods to see him. And instead of the sun tending to his business and going to bed, it was peeping out from behind the moon's skirts trying to get a glimpse of the new baby.

Before long the mama and papa come out on the porch to show off their brand-new baby. The birds “ooooooooohed” and the animals “aaaaaaahed” at how handsome the baby was.

Somewhere in the middle of one of the “ooooooooohs,” or maybe it was on the backside of one of the “aaaaaaahs,” that baby jumped out of his mama’s arms and started growing.

He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until his head and shoulders busted through the roof which was over the porch. John Henry thought that was the funniest thing in the world. He laughed so loud, the sun got scared. It scurried from behind the moon’s skirts and went to bed, which is where it should’ve been all the while.





The next morning John Henry was up at sunrise. The sun wasn't. He was tired and had decided to sleep in. John Henry wasn't going to have none of that. He hollered up into the sky, "Get up from there! I got things to do and I need light to do 'em by."

The sun yawned, washed its face, flossed and brushed its teeth, and hurried up over the horizon.

That day John Henry helped his papa rebuild the porch he had busted through, added a wing onto the house with an indoor swimming pool and one of them jacutzis. After lunch he chopped down an acre of trees and split them into fireplace logs and still had time for a nap before supper.





The next day John Henry went to town. He met up with the meanest man in the state, Ferret-Faced Freddy, sitting on his big white horse. You know what he was doing? He was thinking of mean things to do. Ferret-Faced Freddy was so mean, he cried if he had a nice thought.

John Henry said, "Freddy, I'll make you a bet. Let's have a race. You on your horse. Me on my legs. If you and your horse win, you can work me as hard as you want for a whole year. If I win, you have to be nice for a year."

Ferret-Faced Freddy laughed an evil laugh. "It's a deal, John Henry." His voice sounded like bat wings on tombstones.







The next morning folks lined up all along the way the race would go. John Henry was ready. Ferret-Faced Freddy and his horse were ready.

BANG! The race was on.

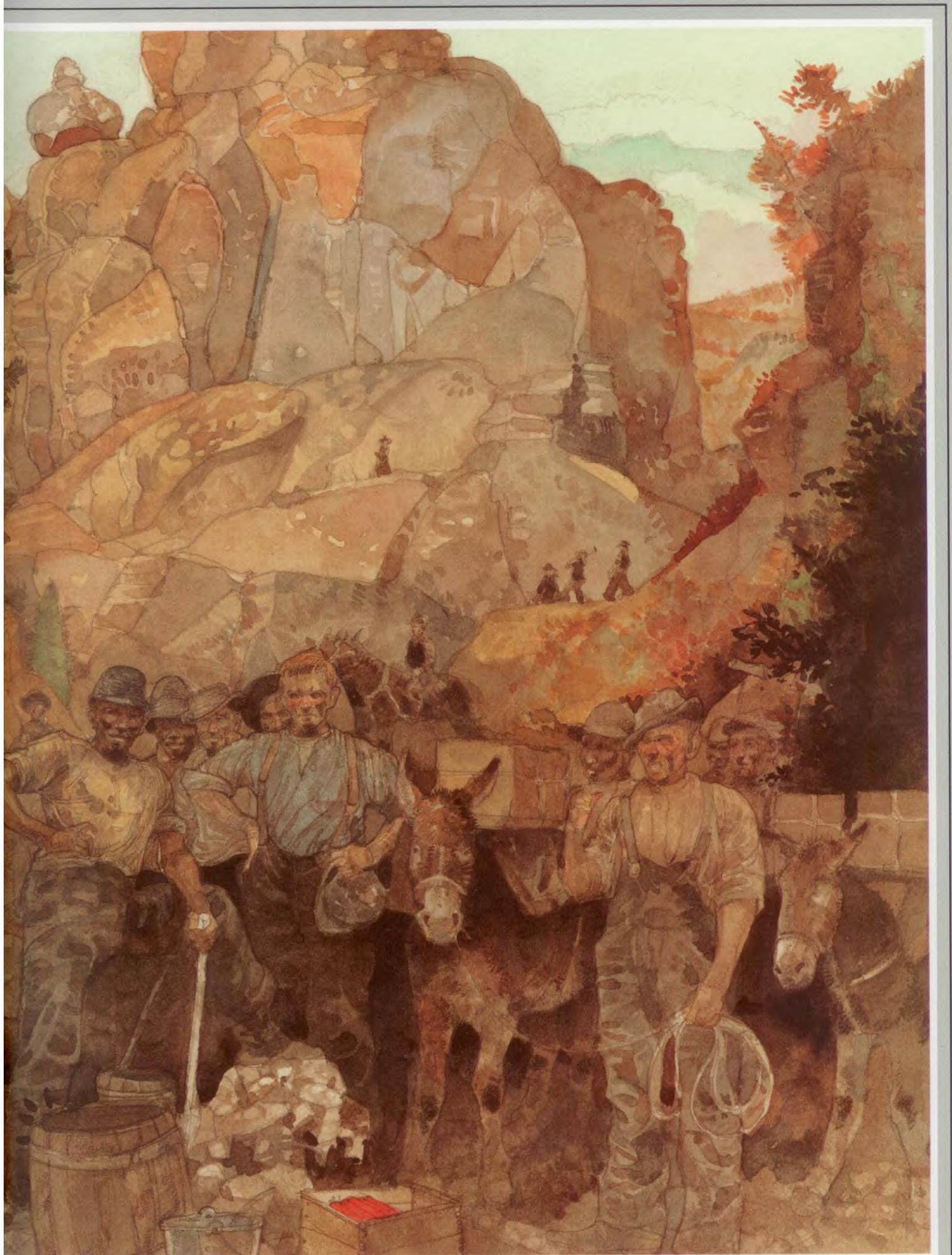
My great-granddaddy's brother's cousin's sister-in-law's uncle's aunt was there that morning. She said everybody saw Ferret-Faced Freddy ride by on his big white horse and they were sho' 'nuf

John Henry decided it was time for him to go on down the big road. He went home and told his mama and daddy good-bye.

His daddy said, "You got to have something to make your way in the world with, Son. These belonged to your granddaddy." And he gave him two twenty-pound sledgehammers with four-foot handles made of whale bone.

A day or so later, John Henry saw a crew building a road. At least, that's what they were doing until they came on a boulder right smack-dab where the road was supposed to go. This was no ordinary boulder. It was as hard as anger and so big around, it took half a week for a tall man to walk from one side to the other.









John Henry offered to lend them a hand.

“That’s all right. We’ll put some dynamite to it.”

John Henry smiled to himself. “Whatever you say.”

The road crew planted dynamite all around the rock and set it off.

**KERBOOM BLAMMITY-
BLAMMITY BOOMBOOM
BANGBOOMBANG!!!**

That dynamite made so much racket, the Almighty looked over the parapets of Heaven and hollered, “It’s getting too noisy down there.” The dynamite kicked up so much dirt and dust, it got dark. The moon thought night had caught her napping and she hurried out so fast, she almost bumped into the sun who was still climbing the steep hill toward noontime.

When all the commotion from the dynamite was over, the road crew was amazed. The boulder was still there. In fact, the dynamite hadn’t knocked even a chip off it.

The crew didn't know what to do. Then they heard a rumbling noise. They looked around. It was John Henry, laughing. He said, "If you gentlemen would give me a little room, I got some work to do."

"Don't see how you can do what dynamite couldn't," said the boss of the crew.

John Henry chuckled. "Just watch me." He swung one of his hammers round and round his head. It made such a wind that leaves blew off the trees and birds fell out of the sky.

RINGGGGGG!

The hammer hit the boulder. That boulder shivered like you do on a cold winter morning when it looks like the school bus is never going to come.

RINGGGGGG!

The boulder shivered like the morning when freedom came to the slaves.

John Henry picked up his other hammer. He swung one hammer in a circle over his head. As soon as it hit the rock—RINGGGG!—the hammer in his left hand started to make a circle and—RINGGGG! Soon the RINGGGG! of one hammer followed the RINGGGG! of the other one so closely, it sounded like they were falling at the same time.

RINGGGG!RINGGGG!

RINGGGG!RINGGGG!

Chips and dust were flying from the boulder so fast that John Henry vanished from sight. But you could still hear his hammers—RINGGGG!RINGGGG!

The air seemed to be dancing to the rhythm of his hammers. The boss of the road crew looked up. His mouth dropped open. He pointed into the sky.

There, in the air above the boulder, was a rainbow. John Henry was swinging the hammers so fast, he was making a rainbow around his shoulders. It was shining and shimmering in the dust and grit like hope that never dies. John Henry started singing:

I got a rainbow
RINGGGG!RINGGGG!
Tied round my shoulder
RINGGGG!RINGGGG!
It ain't gon' rain,
No, it ain't gon' rain.
RINGGGG!RINGGGG!



